Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mary E. Bennett, August 30, 1913

410 August 30, 1913. Miss Mary E. Bennett, 794 West 63rd. Street, Los Angeles. Cal.
Dear Miss Bennett,

I am sorry to hear that the good work you have been doing in your little school is being threatened by the sign-language people.

Statistics prove that congenitally deaf children have been successfully taught by the oral method in this country for nearly fifty years. Statistics also prove that children left deaf by spinal meningitis have been, and are being taught by the oral method, with equal success.

We know that such children are, in many cases, continuing their education in public and private schools with their hearing brothers and sisters.

A congenitally deaf boy, who is now fifteen years old is attending the Phillips Brooke School for Boys, in the city of Philadelphia, Pa. He is the only deaf boy in the school, and was from the beginning exempt from examinations on account of his excellent work, and has next to the best record in the whole school. He will be able to enter Harvard College at sixteen years of age. He has never used either the sign language or manual spelling. He speaks German fluently, and is now taking French and Latin.

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If this can be done with one congenitally deaf child it should be sufficient proof that congenital deafness need not condemn a child to the sign-language method; but I know of several cases of congenitally deaf persons, orally taught, who have graduated from Harvard College, Columbia University, N.Y., and from the School des Beaux Arts, in

Paris, together with a large number of cases of former pupils of oral schools, who are now carrying on their further education successfully in private schools and high schools for the hearing.

You know, of course, that Dr. Waddell of your own city, who is himself an aurist, has two congenitally deaf children who have been taught entirely by the oral method. Possibly he may be of some assistance to you in this emergency.

I have been trying to put myself in your place to see how I can best help you in bringing the matter to the attention of the Superintendent of Public Schools.

The statements of the gentleman you refer to in your letter are so incorrect as to carry their own refutation on their face. I do not think that it will require any argument to convince such a man as the Superintendent of Public Schools that congenitally deaf pupils and pupils deaf from cerebral meningitis can be taught orally — we have too many such cases now being taught successfully in the oral schools of America.

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I would recommend you to bring to his attention the statistics of speech-teaching annually collected by the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, and published in the Volta Review. By writing to Mr. Deland, Superintendent of the Volta Bureau, Washington, D.C., you can obtain a number of reprints of the latest statistics on the subject. From these the Superintendent of Public Schools will discover for himself that the oral method is the growing method in the United States.

I would also recommend you to avoid the use of the word ‘signs’ and substitute the word ‘sign-language’. No one objects to the use of those natural ‘signs’ employed by hearing and speaking people to express their emotions or to emphasize a point; whereas there is

great objection to a language of signs, whereby ideas can be imparted without the use of words at all.

The language of signs still used in some of the older schools for the Deaf constitutes a distinct language by itself, quite different from English. It originated in the school of the Abbe de l'Epee and the Abbe Sicard in Paris, about the end of the eighteenth century; and it was imported into America by the Rev. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Mons. Laurent Clerc, about the year 1817, when the first of the existing American schools for the Deaf was opened 4 413 in Hartford, Conn.

That it is not necessary to employ this sign language is obvious from the fact that thousands of deaf children in the United States have been successfully educated without any recourse to the language of signs; and, if it is not necessary, it is obviously not advisable that deaf children should acquire, and use as their vernacular, so to speak, a language that is not understood by the people among whom they live.

The sign language is, to Americans, essentially a foreign language; and its use interferes with the acquisition of English as a vernacular. Furthermore the sign-language does not help deaf children in acquiring a knowledge of trades and professions among hearing people, because hearing people do not understand it.

What I would specially emphasize is the fact that the sign-language is a distinct language by itself, different from English; and that its use actually unfits the deaf for association with hearing and speaking persons.

I believe that, in an English speaking country like the United States, the English language, and the English language alone , should be used as the means of communication and instruction — at least in schools supported at public expense.

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell